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## Teachers at West County Adult Education program worry about more cuts



Adult education teacher Kenneth Ryan shows his citizenship class a map of the Middle East. Ryan said he likes to teach his students about past and current events, in addition to preparing them for the citizenship test. (Photo: Jennifer Baires)

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By [Jennifer Baires](#) Posted 4 hours ago

Maria Madrid sits at the back of a cluttered and worn classroom, in an annex building of St. Mark's

Parish on Harbour Way. In the back corner of the room a woman tries to keep a half dozen wiggly kids quiet and coloring so they won't disturb the students. The brightly painted walls look faded, and there are holes in them that have yet to be repaired. A large crucifix is propped up in the left front corner.

Madrid leans forward in her seat to look around the rows of people at the white board where the teacher is writing a part of today's history lesson: "Carter is against torture."

"I like to know the story of the United States," Madrid she said after class.

Madrid, 43, moved from El Salvador to Richmond 24 years ago. After two-plus decades in the United States she is ready to take a citizenship test—almost. First, she wants to finish the citizenship class she's taking through West Contra Costa Adult Education.

Speaking slowly and carefully, Madrid describes in English how much she has learned. "Civil rights, the Constitution," she said, "I didn't have any idea."

The class she's taking is "U.S. Citizenship Class, with babysitting," and it's provided free of charge to residents in the West Contra Costa Unified School District.

Madrid said that her family is on a tight budget, and if the class cost anything she wouldn't be able to take it. "It's free," she said. "What a great opportunity."

In addition to citizenship classes, the adult school also offers GED preparation, English as a second language classes, adult basic education, older adult classes and classes for adults with disabilities, all for free. The money comes from the West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD) budget.

Like all public schools in California, the adult education program has suffered severe cuts and many worry it's nearing the end of its life.

"Failure of Prop 30," said Kenneth Ryan, Madrid's citizenship teacher and a veteran at the school, "could be the thing that sweeps it away."

Proposition 30, commonly known as the governor's tax, would raise additional funding for schools through a combination of income and sales tax increases.

Governor Jerry Brown, when drafting this year's state budget, accounted for the passage of Prop 30 in his projections. If the proposition doesn't pass schools can expect mid-year trigger cuts, which for WCCUSD would amount to \$12 million, said Sheri Gamba, the district's associate superintendent of business services.

Ryan said he worries that if the district has to make more cuts, they'll make them to the adult education program. Until 2009, when the state hit school districts with the deepest round of cuts, adult education's survival wouldn't have been an issue.

"In 2009," Ryan said, "we had a \$7 million budget and \$3 million in reserves."

In issuing its cuts, the California Legislature also provided "categorical flexibility," for school districts' remaining funding—meaning districts no longer had to spend a certain amount of their money on programs like music, art or adult education. Ryan said that when adult ed lost this protection WCCUSD took all of its reserves and significantly cut their operating budget.

After this change in law, many adult schools started to charge for key programs—like ESL and basic education—that were once offered for free. West Contra Costa Adult Education tried this method too. Ryan estimates it didn't last for longer than six months.

“The money collected only covered the cost of collecting the money,” he said. To not price out the people who used the programs, the school decided it was best to continue offering them for free. In an area like West Contra Costa County, and in Richmond especially, where almost half of residents speak a language other than English at home and unemployment has hovered around 18 percent for years, it’s argued that the real value in the school is in the free, basic classes.

This year, of the more than 10,000 students registered for classes through adult ed, 63 percent are enrolled in free, basic education classes.

Gamba says the school board understands the value of adult education to the community, and showed that it’s a priority by not cutting it in 2009.

“Our school kept it as a priority because we really feel like, with the number of English learners that we have as students, it’s important,” she said. “What we hope is that we attract those parents to come to school too. So they can support their K-12 students in learning English.”

Still, despite its value, Gamba said that if the school district needs to make cuts the adult education program is one of the first places it considers.

“We have put it in front of the [school board members] every time we talk about the tier-3 programs,” Gamba said.

It is not a position that anyone wants to be in, she said. “If we choose to give \$2 million to adult education then how many classes are we going to have to cut?” she said. “That’s a real life problem.” Teachers and students in the adult education program said they know the choice is not easy, but that the program deserves more.

“It opens up the world for them,” said Kristen Pursley, the lead ESL teacher at the adult school. A couple of years ago Pursley helped start an advocacy group to save the school, which has recently begun teaming with other community groups in favor of Prop 30.

So far, the school has responded to the million dollar budget cuts by decreasing classroom hours. Pursley said that the optimum level for language learners is 12-15 hours a week. Right now, with the decrease in instruction time they are teaching 9 hours a week.

Ryan, the ESL and citizenship teacher, says he started teaching at the adult school because after a few years overseas in Spanish-speaking countries he came to appreciate how hard it is to learn a language—and how important it is to know the language where you live.

“The whole education system gets designed for people who’re going to get masters,” he said. Adult education offers a bridge, a pathway for people who long ago left the ivory tower trail.

Maria Madrid is one of those students. She only completed the 7<sup>th</sup> grade in El Salvador. She says that the citizenship class she’s taking now, and the English class she took earlier, give her confidence. She’s able to do things native English speakers take for granted, like chatting with the grocery store clerk and being able to talk with the other parents at her kids’ soccer games.

Mostly, she said, it feels like she’s more of a member in the community around her. If she passes her citizenship test—and her teacher, Ryan, says 90 percent of his students do—then she will be a full card-carrying member.

“I really want to be a citizen,” said Madrid, smiling broadly at the thought.

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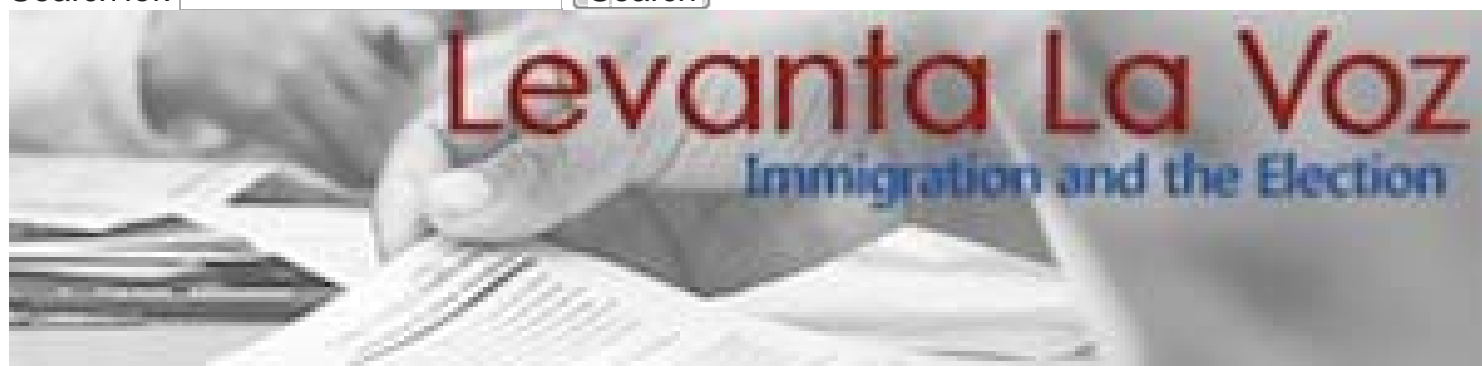
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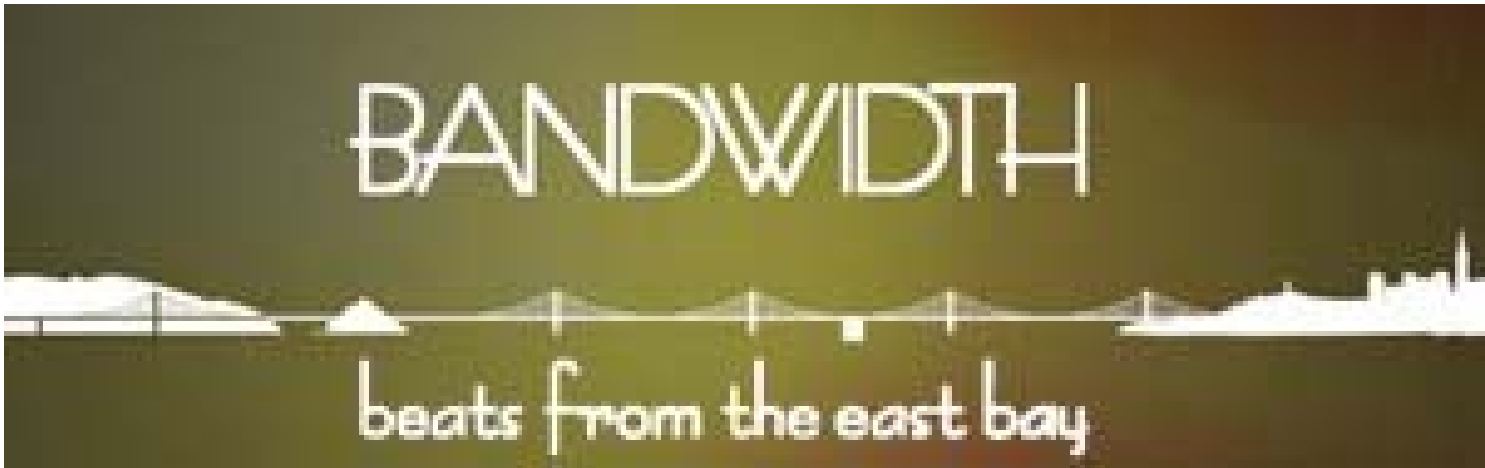
  
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